

The Fifties

by Alan Brinkley



McDonald's store #1 located west of Chicago, Illinois. (Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

The years from the end of World War II to the end of the 1950s were dominated by four powerful changes in American life. The first was the birth of the Cold War, and the great fears that it created. The second was the dramatic growth of affluence, which transformed the lives of many, but not all, Americans. The third was a growing anxiety among many Americans who felt that their lives were too constricted by the staid culture of the era. And the fourth was the emergence of a new subversive culture growing beneath the smooth, stable surface of the decade that would explode in the 1960s.

THE COLD WAR

In 1954, an angry group of men gathered in a hearing room in a Senate Office Building, ostensibly to mediate a dispute but in fact to do battle before the world. On one side was Senator Joseph McCarthy and his aggressive, rag-tag young staff, bolstered by the support of millions of adoring citizens connected to the event only through television, radio, and the newspapers. On the other side were representatives of the combined forces of the presidency, the Army, the Republican Party establishment, virtually the entire Democratic Party, much of the press, and a significant part of the legal profession. For the five days of what became known as the Army-McCarthy hearings, these two forces remained locked in unequal combat until finally McCarthy—a victim in the end of his own arrogance, recklessness, and laziness—staggered from the contest discredited, heading toward a humiliating censure by the Senate, and doomed to a painful obscurity for the remaining few years of his alcohol-fuelled life. And with his fall came the beginning of the end of one of the most corrosive events in modern American history: the great Red Scare of the 1940s and early 1950s.

The phenomenon of Joseph McCarthy is a central story of the 1950s. He was from the generation of World War II veterans, some of whom parlayed their military records (or in McCarthy's case, a much inflated myth about his military record) into political success. Elected to the Senate in Wisconsin in

1946, he approached his re-election still an obscure mediocrity without any important issue or achievement on which to base his campaign. Beginning in 1950, he began searching for visibility, and unsurprisingly in a time when anticommunism was a powerful force in national politics, he chose to present himself as a scourge of disloyalty. At a celebrated speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1950, he waved a piece of paper before his audience and claimed to “hold in my hand” a list of people named by the secretary of state as members of the Communist Party still serving in government. Over time, the number of names on that list fluctuated widely; and through all the years in which McCarthy raged through the political world flogging this issue, never once did he identify anyone who was convicted of treason or subversion. But McCarthy attracted devoted followers nonetheless because of his swaggering, sweaty, populist style, which made him seem to many admirers to be a courageous, unpretentious figure unafraid to attack disloyal elites.

McCarthy was not a leader of his party, but until at least 1952, he was tolerated, even welcomed by the Republican leadership, since the party as a whole was committed to using the fear of communism to break the twenty-year Democratic lock on the presidency. But after the election of Eisenhower in 1952, McCarthy’s roughshod tactics became an embarrassment; and his claims of communist influence in the military particularly enraged a president who had spent most of his life in the Army. The Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 succeeded in discrediting McCarthy in large part because the Eisenhower administration quietly participated in the attack on his credibility.

McCarthy was an important part of the great crusade against domestic subversion that shaped American public life in the 1950s, but he was only one of many figures who helped create the great fear. The American Civil Liberties Union warned that “the threat to civil liberties today is the most serious in the history of our country.” The historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in 1954 of “the widespread foreboding among liberals that this form of dissent will grow until it overwhelms our liberties altogether and plunges us into a totalitarian nightmare.”

The Red Scare was visible in almost every area of American life. But it was primarily a phenomenon of government and politics. It was produced and largely sustained by government, even if it ultimately spread beyond government. Anti-communism became official government policy not just in Washington, but at every level of government. Forty-four out of the forty-eight state governments in the United States passed laws between 1949 and 1955 designed to root out subversives and suppress communist activities. State and local courts engaged in remarkable excesses in pursuing and punishing communists. Even city and county governments became energetic in rooting out people they believed to be subversives. But it was in the federal government that the Red Scare developed most rapidly and decisively.

It is hard to pick a particular moment when one could say the postwar Red Scare “began.” Fear of radicalism and fear of domestic subversion in America has a long history. But a moment that has at least some claim as the starting point for the postwar Red Scare is 1947, when the House Un-American Activities Committee began investigating Hollywood.

HUAC was then a relatively obscure committee, established early in World War II to look into domestic fascism but was unclear about its mission after the war. The members of HUAC were mostly right-wing Republicans and conservative southern Democrats. The committee had a reputation as the worst in Congress, and it attracted very little attention for the next two years—until 1947, when it decided to investigate communist infiltration of the film industry. It was drawn to this target because of right-wing resentment of Hollywood, which the right believed was dominated by New Dealers, Jews, and communists; and there were, in fact, many New Dealers, many Jews, and a not insignificant number of communists in the film industry. A few Hollywood figures agreed to testify before HUAC as “friendly witnesses”—among them Ronald Reagan, although he was not among those who “named names.”

And then HUAC called a series of “unfriendly witnesses”—ten screenwriters. The trials of the Hollywood Ten—a group of screen writers charged with communist leanings—generated enormous publicity. That was partly, of course, because the defendants were from Hollywood; but also because they themselves were determined to generate as much publicity as possible—which in the end did little to help them. Among them were a group of famous writers—Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner, and many others.

A year later, the case of Alger Hiss electrified the anti-communists. In 1948, Whitaker Chambers, an editor of *Time* magazine, announced that in 1937 he had acted as a conduit for passing classified State Department documents to the Soviet Union. The man who had given him the documents, he said, was Alger Hiss, who had been a high-ranking official in the State Department. Hiss, who was now out of government, denied the charges, and most people seemed to believe him. But Chambers produced evidence that damaged Hiss’s claim of innocence. Richard Nixon, a young congressman from California and a member of HUAC, pursued Hiss with great determination. Hiss was finally convicted of perjury (the statute of limitations having run out on the actual espionage) and sentenced to a short term in prison. The Hiss case seemed to confirm a belief growing popular on the right that many American elites were in fact secret communists.

Then, in 1950, only a week after Hiss’s conviction for perjury, a British atomic scientist named Klaus Fuchs, who had worked on the Manhattan Project during the war, turned himself in to Scotland Yard in London and admitted that he had been passing to the Soviets all the atomic secrets to which he had had access. Fuchs’s confession sparked investigations that led to a lower-middle-class Jewish couple in New York: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were charged with having been the conduits through whom Fuchs’s secrets, and the secrets of others, had been passed to the Soviets.

The Rosenbergs were Communist Party members, and so sympathy for them was limited from the beginning. They were tried in an atmosphere of near hysteria and confronted with great legal irregularities engineered by the Justice Department and the judge in the case. They were convicted of treason and sentenced to death.

The great fear slowly declined after the disgrace of Joe McCarthy and other anti-communist demagogues. But the fear of communism remained into the 1960s, and well beyond for those who believed that communism was not just in the Soviet Union, but also in the United States as well.

THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

The performance of the American economy in the decades after World War II appeared to many contemporaries to be, as one historian wrote at the time, “the crossing of a great divide in the history of humanity.” It was often described as an “economic miracle.” The GNP was growing fourteen times as fast as the population and seven times the rate of inflation. The average family income grew as much in the ten years after World War II as it had grown in the previous fifty years combined. Between 1940 and 1965, average income grew from about \$2,200 per family per year to just under \$8,000; when adjusted for inflation, that means average family incomes almost tripled.

These years also saw a significant decrease in (although not a disappearance of) poverty in America. The percentage of families below the official poverty line in 1950 was 30 percent. By 1960 it had dropped to 22 percent and by the 1960s, it had dropped to under 14 percent. Between 1950 and 1970, in other words, poverty declined by over 60 percent.

There were many claims at the time that not only was America becoming wealthier, but that it was becoming more “equal,” that wealth was being redistributed at the same time it was increasing. That was not true. There was no significant redistribution of wealth in the 1950s and 1960s, up or down,

simply an increase in the total amount of wealth. But significantly—and in sharp contrast to the period since the mid-1970s—while there was no downward redistribution of wealth, neither was there an upward distribution of wealth. Distribution patterns, in other words, remained unchanged—the wealthy and the poor experienced roughly the same rates of growth. The gap between them remained the same.

What caused this remarkable growth? One important cause was government spending, which was clearly the major factor in ending the Depression in the early 1940s. Government expenditures in 1929 were 1 percent of GNP; in 1955, they were 17 percent. The bulk of this increase in the early 1950s came from military spending until the end of the Korean War. After that, highway and home construction picked up much of the slack. Veterans' benefits (mortgage and education assistance), government-sponsored research (military and space), and other sources of growth helped fuel the economy. Another cause of postwar economic growth was population growth: the tremendous increase in the birth rate in the decade after World War II ("postwar baby boom"). Population grew in the 1940s and 1950s at twice the rate it had grown in the 1930s. Increased population was also responsible for increased demand and increased consumption, a spur to economic growth.

The growth of suburbs after World War II was one of the great population movements in American history. Eighteen million people—10 percent of the population—moved to suburbs in the 1950s. The American population as a whole grew 19 percent in 1950s; suburban population grew 47 percent. Suburbs created a vast new market and provided an important boost to several of the most important sectors of the economy: the housing industry, the automobile industry, highway construction, and a wide range of consumer industries. And another element of growth was the transformation in labor relations. The growing power of unions allowed workers to receive better wages and.

The cumulative economic effect of all these changes was a radical change in the American life—the birth of an economy (and thus a society) in which many Americans came to consider affluence a norm; in which the ability not just to subsist, but greatly to enhance the quality of one's life came to seem a basic right; in which material abundance became one of the ways in which many, probably most, Americans defined their world.

Economic growth affected both popular and elite ideas about capitalism. Gradually it became possible to believe that there were few limits to economic growth. Capitalism, many Americans came to believe, was capable of much greater feats than most Americans had once believed possible.

John Kenneth Galbraith, the famous Harvard economist, hardly an uncritical defender of capitalism, published a small book in 1952 entitled *American Capitalism*. In it, he expressed some of the wonder and enthusiasm of this new discovery. About capitalism, he wrote simply: "It works!" And he went on to say:

In the United States alone there need not lurk behind modern programs of social betterment that fundamental dilemma that everywhere paralyzes the will of every responsible man, the dilemma between economic progress and immediate increase of the real income of the masses.

The new economic vision was based on the principles of Keynesianism—the idea that there was now a "modern," "scientific" way to manage the economy—not directly, by controlling the corporations, but indirectly, by manipulating fiscal and monetary levers. By the mid-1950s, the belief that Keynesianism worked, that it could provide the key to keeping the economy stable, gained a growing number of economists.

Many economists believed they had discovered the secret of permanent growth and permanent stability. It suggested new possibilities for social progress. Keynesianism, some of its disciples

argued, made it possible to turn capitalism into a genuinely revolutionary force. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote in the 1950s that “Keynes, not Marx, is the prophet of the new radicalism.” *Fortune* magazine published an article entitled “The Permanent Revolution.” The economist Paul Samuelson wrote that “the New Economics really does work. Wall Street knows it. Main Street . . . knows it. . . . You can bet that the statisticians in the Kremlin know it.”

The growth of affluence also provided an opportunity to improve the lives of Americans and to meet social needs. Galbraith urged a major increase in public spending on such things as schools, parks, hospitals, urban renewal, and scientific research. The 1957 launching of Sputnik, the Soviet satellite that was the first to be launched into orbit (before the United States had managed to do so), was a tremendous event in American politics and culture. It too persuaded many Americans, and the government, to ask for massive social investment in an effort to catch up—particularly in science, technology, and education.

FIFTIES SOCIETY

Many Americans in the 1950s considered their era as a time of affluence, community, and unity. Today—a half century later—many people still see those years as a golden era that has now been lost. Even the most sophisticated chroniclers of its time believed in the great successes of the 1950s. The renowned historian Richard Hofstadter wrote at the time:

The jobless, distracted and bewildered men of 1933 have in the course of the years found substantial places in society for themselves, have become homeowners, suburbanites, and solid citizens.

The French writer Simone de Beauvoir said of America in the 1950s:

Class barriers disappear or become porous; the factory worker is an economic aristocrat in comparison with the middle class clerk; even segregation is diminishing; consumption replaces acquisition as an incentive. America . . . as a country of vast inequalities and dramatic contrasts is ceasing to exist.

Many middle-class Americans in these years believed in the idea that the American people, for all their diversity, were becoming more and more alike—and could expect to continue to do so in the future. Few ideas became more pervasive in popular culture than the sense that America was becoming a middle-class nation—a society in which everyone was either already part of the middle class, soon to become part of it, or aspiring to become part of it. And there was some evidence for in this powerful idea.

There was rapid growth in the number of people able to afford what the government defined as a “middle-class” standard of living—60 percent of the American people. Home ownership rose from 40 percent in 1945 to 60 percent in 1960. By 1960, 75 percent of all families owned cars; 87 percent owned televisions; 75 percent owned washing machines. But these figures also show the survival of a substantial minority (25 to 40 percent) that remained outside the middle class. More than 23 percent of Americans still lived in poverty, and African American poverty was far higher.

American politics in the 1950s was dominated by Dwight D. Eisenhower, who emerged from the war as the military man with the most political appeal, largely because of his personality. There were other generals who had performed with at least equal brilliance and effectiveness. But none of them had Eisenhower’s personal qualities: his public warmth and friendliness and geniality; his dazzling, highly photogenic smile, which became his political trademark; his comforting, unthreatening public image. It helped him become president in 1953, and it helped him remain popular until he left the White House in 1961.

But Eisenhower was also appealing because he seemed to embody the stability and the desire for unity that characterized so many other areas of American culture in the 1950s. Eisenhower's approach to leadership was based on two fairly simple assumptions. He had a deep aversion to conflict and confrontation. He leaned instinctively toward consensus and conciliation; and he tried to avoid doing anything that would disrupt the harmony that he liked to believe prevailed in American society. And he was deeply committed to capitalism, and to capitalists; a champion of free enterprise; a cheerleader for the business community in this hour of its great economic triumph. Eisenhower's presidency was an embodiment of the middle-class yearning for stability and consensus.

Eisenhower became, in effect, the cautious, prudent, conciliatory paternal figure presiding over the heyday of middle-class dominance of American life. He seemed to embody the era's apparent stability and unity and homogeneity. He epitomized the American middle class's idealized image of itself. And not incidentally, he presided over an era of almost unbroken prosperity and unbroken peace that reinforced the power of the stable, consensual public culture of the time.

The 1950s were good times for middle-class white Americans who were content with their era. But it was not a good time for dissent. The most obvious explanation for that is the Cold War and the fear of communism—fanned by opportunistic and demagogic politicians—that accompanied it. It was also a result of a homogeneous popular culture that had little patience with divergent views. The growing intolerance of non-conformity helped produce the staunching of dissent at many levels of society. Hollywood studio executives blacklisted writers and actors not just because of the Red Scare but also because of their own dislike of their politics. Newspaper and magazine publishers banished writers who were too stridently critical of the political and economic orthodoxy of their time. Television and radio executives refused to allow even mildly dissenting voices access to the air. The revered Edward R. Murrow, the first great television newscaster, found his career at CBS derailed after he broadcast a program in 1954 attacking Joseph McCarthy—even though by then McCarthy's influence was already in decline.

In 1953, the political writer I. F. Stone—also a harsh critic of McCarthyism and of conservative politics—found it necessary to found his own political journal, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, because none of his previous employers, including the *Nation*, would publish his work any longer. Years later, in the early 1980s, he published a collection of his writings from those years. He titled it *The Haunted Fifties*.

For Stone, and for many others, the fifties seemed haunted because the public culture of the time was so resolutely self-congratulatory and so stifling to alternative views; because the problems and injustices and dislocations of the time often seemed hidden under a haze of bright, cheerful, affirmative images of a prosperous middle-class nation happily embarked on a new period in its history—enthroned as the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

But beneath the shining surface of the public nation of the 1950s lived another America—a shadow nation or, as I. F. Stone sometimes called it, a subversive nation, which was gradually building up a critique of American society and politics that would burst into the center of national consciousness in the 1960s and beyond. That critique took many forms. African Americans demonstrated in Montgomery and elsewhere, firing the first shots of the Civil Rights Movement. The restive left was struggling to reveal the persistence of poverty in the midst of prosperity. There was increasing resistance by women to the obstacles they faced in the workplace and in the larger culture when they attempted to move out of their roles as wives and mothers. There was the growing concern about the environment among scientists and ecologists who saw, much earlier than most Americans did, the dangers of heedless economic growth.

But equally important were critiques that expressed a series of anxieties and thwarted desires that were particular to the white male culture of the time. There was a growing fear that the modern world threatened their autonomy, their independence, their authenticity.

Employees of large corporate organizations, the critics of the 1950s and early 1960s argued, learned to dress alike, to pattern their lives in similar ways, to adopt similar values and goals, to place a high value on “getting along” within the hierarchical structure of the corporation. In fact, complaints about the conformity, the homogeneity of the culture of organization became one of the staples of social criticism in the 1950s, as social scientists came to see in this culture a challenge to the capacity of individuals to retain any psychological autonomy. The organization, they argued, was a debilitating force, creating alienated conformists afraid to challenge prevailing norms. They were people who would take no risks; people who feared to be different.

Corporate workers, critics argued, faced constant pressures to get along by going along. The sociologist David Riesman wrote in his influential book, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), that modern society was giving birth to a new kind of man. In earlier eras, most men and women had been “inner-directed” people, defining themselves largely in terms of their own values and goals, their own sense of their worth. Now, the dominant personality was coming to be “other-directed” man, defining himself in terms of the opinions and goals of others, or in terms of the bureaucratically established goals of the organization.

But perhaps the clearest example of disenchantment with and alienation from the middle class was not the work of these mainstream writers and intellectuals. The clearest example came instead from a group of younger writers and artists who emerged largely from the middle class but chose to stand outside the mainstream of middle class culture. They held that culture in contempt—they ridiculed and repudiated not just the personal anxieties of organizational life, but many of the fundamental premises of middle-class society. There were the men and women who called themselves “the Beats.” They openly challenged the conventional values of middle-class American society: material success, social values, political habits. Many of them adopted an alternative lifestyle for themselves that emphasized rootlessness, anti-materialism, drugs, antagonism to technology and organization, sexual freedom, and a dark, numbing despair about the nature of modern society. But most of all the Beats were in search of “ecstasy,” of a release from the rational world, of a retreat from what they considered the repressive culture of their time.

The poet Allen Ginsberg became the most influential figure in the Beat world, the man many people considered the founder of the movement. In 1955, he wrote a poem that became something of a credo for their generation. The poem was entitled *Howl*, and it attacked virtually every aspect of modern society as corrupt and alienating:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night. . . .

It was an attack on American materialism, on American technology, on organization, on suburbs, on militarism, on the very idea of progress; an attack on all the underpinnings of modern middle-class culture and society; even an attack on rationality itself.

This is what made the Beats seem so frightening and subversive to many more conventional Americans in the 1950s—their frank rejection of the disciplined, ordered life of the postwar middle class; their open alienation from a culture that most people were lionizing; the way in which some, at least, ignored the careful boundaries of race that mainstream society still observed and made connections with black culture; their celebration of the sensual as opposed to the rational.

The Beats themselves attracted relatively little attention from the American mainstream in the 1950s and early 1960s—except as the objects of ridicule and contempt. But they were significant because they were the clear antecedents of the counterculture that emerged in the late 1960s.

Another, ultimately more powerful and influential critique of the middle-class culture of the 1950s came from feminism. That critique did not become widely visible in American life until the late 1960s, and its influence did not become profound until even later than that. But the problems and discontents to which feminism was a response were, of course, very much a part of the culture of the 1950s. One of those signs was the publication in 1963 of a book that is generally regarded as a landmark in the rebirth of contemporary feminism: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—written and researched largely in the late 1950s. Friedan had graduated from Smith College in 1942; and in 1957, fifteen years later, married with children, living in suburban New York and working as a freelance writer, she traveled around the country to interview her Smith College classmates about the state of their lives for what was supposed to be a soft article for a women's magazine. Almost without exception, she claimed, the women she encountered were married, with children, living in prosperous, upper-middle-class suburbs. They were living out the dream that affluent bourgeois society had created for women in the postwar years, what Friedan called the "mystique of feminine fulfillment," by acting out the expected roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers. They responded to questions about their lives with forced, chirpy reports of contentment—proud talk of husbands, children, and homes. And yet, as Friedan pressed further, she found that behind this mystique, in virtually all the women she interviewed, lay a fundamental sense of uneasiness, frustration, vague unhappiness that most women had great difficulty articulating. Friedan dubbed this the "problem that has no name," a problem that even women themselves had been unable to identify or explain.

But the real problem, Friedan said, was embedded in the nature of the gender roles society had imposed on women. The women she met were intelligent, educated, talented; and yet they had no outlets for their talents except housework, motherhood, and the companionship they offered their husbands. "The feminine mystique," she wrote, "has succeeded in burying millions of women alive."

Our retrospective image of the "fifties" as the age of Ozzie and Harriet is not entirely false. It was the image that many middle-class Americans accepted at the time, and a reflection of the way many of them in fact lived. But it would be a mistake to accept the middle-class interpretation of American life in the 1950s at face value. Because to understand the realities of society in the 1950s, it is important to understand that the consensual middle-class worldview that seemed so powerful at the time was not fully accepted even by many members of the middle class itself.

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